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1917?

By
EDWIN BALMER

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Tribune

(Continued.)

"God help our K's and L's," some one muttered as the American submarines disappeared into the darkness. "If they run across the regent's Z's."

"I'd swap them chances," some one else rejoined. "We've five destroyers to ourselves and the Pennsylvania this night!"

Bob Wendell kept silent, but he followed the feeling of his companions. The K and L boats were taking terrible chances, but certainly neither the Pennsylvania nor the Arizona could spare them a convoy. With the Balch gone, five destroyers remained to do picket and outpost duty for two speeded-up destroyers. Four for each ship would be a minimum for safety; the regent protected even his cruisers of the Pera class with four destroyers each; it was known that the prince's dreadnaughts had six or eight destroyers apiece.

CHAPTER XII.

God in the Hurricane.

NIGHT was coming down, close and clouded; the wind, which had been steadily raking, blew in uglier squalls. The radio, which flashed to the shore the news that the Americans had lost the Balch, but in return had damaged the Carthage and one Pera, brought back the weather warning in the navy code; a hurricane was on the way. The government had forbidden the publishing of the warning ashore, lest it be sent to the enemy's ships, too, but the meteorologist told the story. Rain was falling now—rain, driven almost horizontal by the gale and ceasing suddenly when lightning flashed and forked over the sea and thunder tremendously rumbled.

About 8 o'clock Bob Wendell went to the wardroom for supper. Torpedo defense requires all gunnery officers to be on duty during firing; but, although torpedo attack by destroyers was still possible, the weather made it more and more improbable and the lightning was flashing so frequently as to illumine the sea for seconds at a time. Accordingly, officers and men were being sent in small groups, to supper.

Bob sat beside Gary at the table. It was the first time they had seen each other since the battle.

"Good shooting from number two turret, Bobby?"

"That was Louellen Gary, you should have seen him—especially after the Balch got it."

"I heard; his brother was boatwain—so he gave the Rera that last shot!"

"By the way, did you see it? Where it hit, I mean?"

Gary hesitated a moment. "Something funny about that; I'm crazy, of course—for we were out of range then—but I've an idea that shot hit, somehow. I didn't see any splash, but then, if a shot's pretty short, it's easy to miss a splash."

"Not for you; some good spotting today, Gary. The men—well, they just felt it. A couple of the Carthage's thirteen hit the Pennsylvania; of course you know."

"On armor. No real damage, was there? We weren't missed by much a few times."

Then they talked of what was ahead of them. The Arizona and the Pennsylvania and the destroyers had not turned back to the rear; they were keeping on south and east. The officers spoke in low tones, and after the mess attendants had served them.

"The special god who looks after drunken men and fools has sent us this hurricane," Gary ejaculated.

"Look at the fix we were in—one division at New York, ours at Norfolk, the Delaware and North Dakota at Charleston, and most of the rest of our decent ships beating it up from Haiti and the Gulf as fast as they can make it. Special Providence put a finger in that, too; the ships we have to have were on the way when the Balch woke Washington up. But at that, we were up against it till this wind came along. In any reasonable weather their air craft would be scouting every where to find where we are—with their battle cruisers and perhaps a division of their Eargons they could have cut off any division of ours they wanted and stopped us from ever getting a fleet together."

"The Oklahoma and Nevada, with some more destroyers, are coming out. I suppose you know. They left the roads just at dark and will join us about midnight."

Gary nodded. "To try a little surprise party on the prince in the morning. . . . Going up again now?"

"No; I've next watch. I'm to sleep now."

"Be'm I?"

"They went to their rooms together. 'Good luck!'"

"Good luck!"

Wendell went to his room and closed the door. It was the first time since he had been in battle that he had been away from the observation of his fellows. He stood for a moment, dazed at the relax within himself, and for an instant he opposed it, then he sank down upon his bed and lay on his back staring up at the painted

steel of his ceiling. He had fought in battle!

It could not have been the peril of it which had excited and exhausted him; it could not have been, during the long hour, the imminence of obliteration. Except for the trying, waiting minutes of inaction after the submarines attacked, he had scarcely been conscious of reckoning his chances for life or death; something far mightier, more masterful and overwhelming, had absorbed him.

Besides, so far as danger went, he had been in terrible peril before—there was a time, on the side of the Matterhorn, when a snowstorm came and he and a companion and a guide had clung to an icy crack helpless for more than an hour, when a slip by any one of the three would have dragged all to death. Personal peril there had been as great and had lasted as long as this battle today; the danger of his ride with Jim after Ingout, when the spy had turned to throw his bomb, had been even greater; when Bob first boarded the Arizona in the afternoon, and the aeroplane dropped its explosives, he personally had been nearer obliteration than he had since.

But the battle! How was it so different from other dangers? Because, while another was trying to kill him he also was trying to kill? That was not it; for, when Ingout tried to kill him, he had killed Ingout, and it was not like this. When the aeroplane had destroyed men beside him the guns from the ships were firing up at the plane, but neither was that like this. Those things were all petty—personal;

that was it; everything before this had been personal, and battle—battle was not personal at all. Or it had not been personal till now—this moment when he was alone at last, shut in his room away from the rest, with Nellie's picture in the drawer of his desk.

He sat up and leaned over and opened the drawer and took out the picture and gazed down at it. The sight of her face—her lips which he had kissed so many times, her dear, soft eyes gazing straight into his, steadied him for the first seconds and then unnerved him. Women and children, some one had said, had been killed—torn to pieces, probably, and dismembered—when the Carthage and the Pera had shelled Ocean City and Virginia Beach to "draw the American ships out."

Well, the American ships had come out, and he had fought his turret and given them shells for the shells they had sent at Virginia Beach. A mast was down on the Pera; other shells must have hit; he must have killed some of the murderers aboard. But while he was squaring that score the regent's submarines were striking too. The Balch had gone down with all hands while the Arizona had, had to steam by at full speed.

Little "Stubby" Derr, Bob had learned, had commanded the Balch. He was not in Bob's class, but Bob had got to know him pretty well when they both were on Chinese station together. Stubby was "a game little chap"; Bob remembered the Army-Navy football game in Stubby's last year, when—well, Bob knew just how Stubby spoke to his men, and smiled at them when everything was done at them when nothing left to do but cheer the ship you saved, as it went by, and then go down with your own.

And Stubby, too, had been married; in his little steel walled cabin, now deep down under the water, he had his picture of his widow. Did she know it? "Destroyer Balch lost with all hands." That was a sentence of the message which had gone to the shore. When and how would it reach her? Was there now a baby? Bob wondered. What had little Stubby Derr seen when, at the last moment, he was alone and need no longer smile at his men?

Bob got up and opened the door; it was choking close in there with the port closed and covered. He started as he saw some one standing without; it was Gary Starnes at the door of his room. Gary, too, had found it close and stifling; his collar was loose, and he had taken off his coat, but like Bob, he had not further undressed.

"It's hot," Bob said to him simply. "Awful."

The friends faced each other in an instant fairly. The same thought was in the hearts of both, and they both knew it. Neither would say it to the other, nor would either deny it as their eyes met. What they had seen happen to Stubby Derr was soon to come to them; when the great battle was joined, only the luckiest of chances could save either of them. The end might come before the great battle, of course; it might come tonight, at any moment.

Gary stepped back into his room; Bob returned to his and put out the light. He lay on his bed, trying now to sleep, but quite unable to. There were a thousand things which he had meant to say to Nellie, and none of which he had said. He sat up once and started to find the light to write to her, then he lay down again. Those were not the sort of things one could write; they sprang on a sheet of paper; he wanted her to know that if he did not come back she should marry again, that he would prefer that; he wanted her to know that his mind would not stay on that.

"Up 200! Up!" "I was 'on' and, you see, sir, my brother was boatwain of the Balch." "That was right, Louellen." "It's no use now; no use." Bob went to sleep.

A few minutes before midnight he was roused; he buttoned his collar, got into his coat and shoes. The rolling of the ship, the impact of the water outside his port, the crashing thunder told that the storm was severe again; he seized his raincoat and hurried to his watch above. Ross, whom he relieved, pointed to him the positions of the other ships; in addition to the great bulk of the Pennsylvania,

showing in green silhouette as the lightning flashed, there were two other great dreadnaughts and half a dozen new destroyers; the Oklahoma and the Nevada had come up.

Except for the dim glows reflecting directly down upon the water to show their positions to the other ships of the squadron, the great vessels steamed without lights; only now and then, as a lightning flash seemed to show something moving over the waves, a destroyer turned a searchlight through



He Sat Up and Took Out the Picture.

the blackness about; and once, at an alarm which brought all men aboard the battleships running to torpedo defense stations, a gun clattered from the Alvin and Bob saw the streaks of the shells as the "tracer" lights flared on the backs of the projectiles traveling toward the target. Simultaneously the searchlights showed a destroyer stealing toward the squadron. Fifty guns spat at it; the blackness was streaked by the flares of the "tracer" lights and the destroyer tried to escape. But while the searchlights still showed it a shell struck a torpedo board, and before the Alvin reached the spot the enemy's ship was gone.

"That squares for the Balch!" Bob said to himself when the firing had ceased, but as he repeated it he grew more tense when the lightning again gave him sight of the sea; and through-out the American ships every officer and man remained at torpedo defense stations. Had the enemy destroyer sold itself well? Was its appearance a forerunner of a greater torpedo attack; or, before the vessel blew up, had it wireless information which should bring upon the American squadron a superior force of the enemy in the morning?

The four dreadnaughts were steaming to surprise the regent's ships which were known to be detailed to cut off the American ships coming from the Gulf. Would surprise now meet counter-surprise?

For a little longer, at least, God rode in the hurricane. A war vessel—she was a great ship with one mast gone—was ashore and pounding to pieces off Cape Hatteras. Life savers were trying to get to the wreck, but she had foundered deep and far out. The Arizona's radio picked up the news first at 2 o'clock. An hour later more news came. The life savers had rescued some of the men from the wrecked ship, and wreckage was coming ashore. The vessel was the armored cruiser Gerel of the Pera class—damaged in the fight with the Arizona so that when the storm came she did not steer. Fifty officers and men had been killed by gunfire. Of the remaining 600 thirty-four had been saved. When the news was brought him Bob saw to it that word was passed at once to Louden.

(To Be Continued.)

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